Perspective

Public Administration as Its Own Steward in Times of Partisan Deadlock and Fiscal Stress

The presidential election is behind us, and restoring the nation’s fiscal balance is before us. Yet the nation remains deeply divided over the role of government in society. At the same time, the soaring public debt remains of central concern to that government. Meanwhile, public administration as the action arm of government remains in limbo; it faces its own “administrative cliff” of draconian budget cuts. Must it simply wait helplessly at the edge of that cliff?

I say no. It is my view that the field’s administrators, employees, and academic observers should face up squarely to the twofold threat of deadlocked political branches and sweeping, across-the-board cutbacks and adopt the conscious mind-set of being themselves stewards of the institutional well-being of the country’s administrative assets during this time of emergency.

The Notion of Administrative Self-Stewardship

Although my term is new, forms of administrative self-stewardship have long been in effect in American public administration. Examples extend from the good government movement in the late nineteenth century to the New Public Management of the late twentieth. However, in these pages, I am not proposing administrative reform. I am urging that a more transcendent step be taken than refining the administrative machinery created and overseen by legislatures and managed by chief executives and their political appointees. The challenge instead is to place a heavy mantle of responsibility for guidance and monitoring on its very organizations and their leaders, to be carried out for the good of the country. Moreover, this responsibility extends not merely to keeping the machinery running smoothly, but also to grappling with the large policy decisions that surround the appropriate allocation of public resources.

Hence, I am proposing, during this period of deadlock and severe fiscal realignment, that administration shift from being conceived solely as an instrument for carrying out the political decisions of others to a center of policy action itself that is involved in making these decisions. In the final analysis, self-stewardship is a mode in which the field’s institutions reconstitute themselves to cope with today’s deadlock and cutbacks and tomorrow’s even greater challenges—the full nature of which we cannot imagine.

I realize full well that many observers of the administrative scene will regard this proposal as utterly naive. Yes, bureaus engage in politics, they will say, but only self-serving “bureaucratic politics” in which competing centers of power maneuver against rivals for turf and funds. Yet if this orthodox cynicism is allowed to stand unchallenged during this period of emergency, when it is over, the combination of Washington brinkmanship, congressional inaction, and slash-and-burn downsizing will have caused irreparable damage to the administrative capabilities of our governance system. As with an uncontrolled public debt, a devastated bureaucracy is not a legacy that we can afford to pass on to future generations. The bureaucrats themselves must see to it that this does not happen, even while being drained of substantial wherewithal.

The Aims of Administrative Self-Stewardship

Smart Cuts

The proposal that I am advancing here embraces four cardinal aims. The first is to demand that spending reductions do minimal damage. Administrators must insist that appropriation cuts and reductions in force not be applied at the same percentage to all organizations and programs. Instead, the process of pruning back must be done selectively and discriminately. Outdated and peripheral agencies should be terminated. Others should be subject to an unprecedented search for programs, offices, and support units that are not of central relevance to the core mission; they, too, should be eliminated or at least recast or combined. The number of top management positions should be pared back as well, to the fewest needed for policy direction and review of core programs. In this process,
the key is to define the essence of the mission sharply and stick to that focus so that it alone is adequately funded. The process of shedding the rest will arouse great heat and unrest from the employees, clients, contractors, and private groups that are adversely affected, but to come out alive from the long-lasting nightmare of belt-tightening cuts, such measures are essential. The administrator must forget about being a budget maximizer and instead be a stewardship maximizer.

Saved Institutions
Second, it is essential that the morale and culture of agency life be kept vital. Any existing spirit of dedication and self-sacrifice, nurtured over years of institutional evolution, must not be allowed to slip away. To this end, several steps are needed. The process of budget cutting must be transparent and well explained so that surviving employees do not feel that they are next. All staff must be periodically reminded that because they, the chosen survivors, are of indispensable importance, it is even more essential that they redouble their dedication to contributing as much as possible to the mission. The full cultural panoply of symbols, rituals, and social events should be reenergized in order to reinforce institutional identity and commitment. Walk-around managers must show by example that the exigency calls for a “wartime” mentality of special perseverance and grim humor. The integrity of connections to the past should be maintained, for example, by preserving agency records and the calculation of serial statistics. At the same time, new ideas for operating more smoothly and effectively ought to be welcomed, not postponed. Keeping the institution’s heart and home intact is essential not only for operational reasons, but also to avoid the cost of building anew later on.

Open Communication
A third cardinal aim is to keep lines of communication open, not only among employees, but to all strategic points in the organization’s environment. This includes political executives and members of key legislative committees. Undue secrecy or behind-the-scenes dealing must be eschewed in favor of keeping superiors and legislators informed. Insider contacts at department headquarters, among congressional staff, in the White House, and within the press should be kept warm with use. Along with active efforts by administrators to achieve their stewardship aims, the invaluable advantage of mutual trust among stakeholders must be nurtured to the extent possible. Contractors, recipients of grants-in-aid, nonprofit partners, and devolved program implementers should know what is going on and how they might be affected. Existing emergency and intelligence command centers could be used to communicate simultaneously with multiple constituencies. Static agency Web sites can be converted into dependable, up-to-date sources of program data. Efforts can be made to develop systematic ways to use social media for keeping in touch with individual clients and members of the public.

Savvy Politics
Finally, administrators should conceive of themselves not only as competent managers but also as smooth and savvy politicians. Yet their aim is not to gain power for its own sake, but to make it possible for their agency to weather the fiscal storm, retain its keen sense of purpose, and keep the level of operational effectiveness high and steady. Their central strategic task is to wrest their agencies from a state of governance limbo and escape the partisan deadlock gripping the rest of the governance system. As far as tactics are concerned, minimally abrasive means of acquiring influence should take precedence over more aggressive moves, such as mobilizing public protests or closing popular public facilities (such as national parks) to bring pressure to bear. Less dangerous and more likely effective steps are needed, such as encouraging joint publicity campaigns by affected stakeholders. As with savvy politicians anywhere, stump speeches should be memorized that point out that these actions are not to aggrandize agency interests but to further everyone’s goal of inching toward fiscal balance. This theme alone will win credits in high quarters. Even more important is the need to back this rhetoric with tangible efforts to deliver all public services remaining in a dependable and efficient way. In the final analysis, the truly essential quarter in which to gain trust is the public at large.

Return to the Old Normal or Adapt to a New One?
It is impossible to know how long such self-stewardship by the administrative state will need to continue. It may be that the political branches eventually regain their footing and reset the expenditure–revenue match to the point that the era of severe cutbacks can ease to a close. Yet, on the other hand, we may be facing a semipermanent Malthusian-like specter whereby bureaucratic “population” growth always outpaces resource “food supply” expansion. Switching from an economics analogy to a biological one may then apply: a Darwinian process of natural selection in which only well-stewarded bureaucracies survive and prosper.